

Press article: The game is up

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design games
the computer game is dead, long live the computer game

The game is up

It's official, the computer games industry is a lumbering giant that is practically devoid of direction or strategy. Like the gold rush a century before it, people have poured into the games industry in pursuit of fame and fortune; a few have found it, a few have been destroyed by it, while most have had to be content with making a reasonable living from it.

For an industry that is now worth \$18bn each year and rising, there are too few success stories and far too many companies facing financial ruin. So where does all the money go? Well, you will not be surprised to know that most of it gets wasted.

If you had to list the top ten most creative industries in the world today, computer games would probably register near the top of most people's list. It's strange then, that the industry should be such a nervous, backward looking beast. When a successful product does come along, it usually takes everyone by surprise; 70% of the entire industry then spend hour upon hour trying to copy that success. Think back to the birth of Tetris if you will, and then try to remember just how many Tetris clones came along, pushed by companies that were desperate to jump onto a bandwagon that had long since moved on.

It's tempting to say that the industry's problems started when marketing departments first became bigger than their development counterparts; when more money was spent on advertising a game than was spent developing it. That would only be part of the story though.

The other half of the story is the nature of most people that are attracted to the industry. The failed rock stars, the game designers that simply can't, the business lunch trendies and worst of all, the budding film producers that wouldn't stand a chance of making it in the movie industry. Put a selection of these people together and you have a great way of burning a million dollars. In fact, by the time their project has overrun by a couple of years that million has probably been turned in to four or five million.

Made in Britain

According to a report in the Guardian newspaper recently, Britain ranks second only to Japan in the authoring of games software in a global market worth over £12bn a year. Home-grown products account for 12% of the US market and 25% of the European market. British game players alone spend £1bn a year, compared with £650m spent in cinemas.

The article goes on to talk about a new report on knowledge entrepreneurship, to be published by Demos, which warns that the very factors that led to the current success may ultimately be the industry's downfall. "The British computer games industry is at a critical point in its development," the report concludes.

"The next few years will prove whether it will suffer the fate of earlier innovative British industries, built on a mixture of entrepreneurship and DIY knowledge - shipbuilding in Glasgow, textile machinery in Lancashire - which were unable to meet better organised, funded and skilled competition as the market matured."

It's not just the British sector of the industry that is in turmoil and crying out for change so we really are looking at change on a global scale.

Leaving the old school behind

So, where does everything start to go wrong? It's time to look at some of the problems that afflict so many development teams, and later, at some of the solutions to the problems. Let's begin by introducing caricatures of characters that can be found in many organisations around the world. Ultimately, of course, it's the people with their hands on the rudder that carry the responsibility and it's these very same people that can make the necessary changes for a brighter future.

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The blind prophet

How many times have you heard 'It's going to be the best game you've ever seen, honest'? A lot of the best games come into being on the back of a single person's passion. Now I'm not about to knock those with passion; it's in too short a supply as it is. However, a compromised idea is all too often 'forced' to happen because the guy whose idea it was can't let go and can't take constructive criticism. Games like this tend to go on for years, desperately waiting for the magic twist that's going to make them great. Sometimes they get killed some time before launch but most of them make it to market regardless, sell about ten copies and disappear. Whereupon the blind prophet shouts out, I have seen the light, let me lead you to.. ouch, who put that pile of unsold games there?

The bully

Some projects suffer at the hands of a dominant coder who thinks he's god's gift to programming, women and rally driving. He usually carries far too much confidence for his own good and manages to box management into a corner with complex words and techno speak. The management of the company make the mistake of adopting the 'We can't afford for him to leave so let's just run with his ideas' policy, which is often a very costly mistake.

The optimist

This chap tends to be able to convince producers, managers and publishers that he can develop the entire project in three months, and on his own. Unfortunately, because his audience are predisposed to hearing such good news, they swallow it, hook, line and sinker. When the optimist has managed to do little more than scratch the surface of the task after the three months are up, he explains that he's had to endure the most unlikely problem and that he will deliver the project in another three months, guaranteed. Once again, this is music to the ears of the listening ones and another impossible schedule gets rubber stamped.

This sad sequence has been known to go on and on for three years or more, after which time the optimistic programmer swears blind that he never once promised the entire project in three months and then goes on to complain about not having sufficient support in the team.

The optimistic bully

The worst of all worlds; this person can get away with his fantasy claims even with a larger team around him, by bullying them all into compliance. This has the unfortunate tendency of breeding yet more programming bullies for future projects.

Desperate Dan

This problem of the impossible schedule is very common indeed. In fact, I'm fairly convinced that most people reading this will have experienced this problem from one perspective or another. Desperate to get another project up and running and a new cash stream coming in, the decision makers at the company strike a very weak bargain with a publisher; so weak that they, like the optimist, have promised the world in double-quick time and at a bargain-basement price.

Before a line of code is actually typed in anger or a pixel of colour is committed to the screen, this project is doomed. In some cases the actual company is doomed but thankfully this is slightly less common. This is where the decision to keep the optimist on the books pays off, because the decision maker can now call on the services of the optimist to sanction the project goals and timeline. "There, I told you it could be done!"

When the agreed gold master date comes around and the game is barely recognisable as a finished product, the money has already been spent and the company are desperate for more; the decision maker is forced to go cap-in-hand to the publisher, threatening that the team will dissolve if there is not more money made available to keep them going.

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In such circumstances, you can wave goodbye to a great product; too many compromises have already been made.

The techno junky

This person will happily invest six months or more on an extra ripple here and an extra particle there. In addition to the time consumption you quite often find that the minimum spec for the title has crept up by stealth. Where a 3D card wasn't necessary before, it is now, where 32Mb of memory was agreed as necessary before, 128Mb is needed now. When asked if these lovely effects can be made user-selectable, the answer is often, oh no, it would have taken me far too long to build in that degree of scalability. Well can we remove these features then? The reply will be something like 'No, don't you remember agreeing to their inclusion just before the last trade show?'

The big woolly jumper

Typically, this type of game designer has no programming experience and tends to be a detail person, sometimes fussy and erratic. To really enjoy their creations, you need to be strangely attracted to chaos or you need to be someone with an unhealthy passion for the subject matter of the game. It's not all doom and gloom though, because every now and then, the Woolly Jumper will use the rules of chaos to knit a great creation.

The wordsmith

Too many game designers are more at home with prose and anecdote than they are with computer and software. You will find these characters attending conferences more often than they are at their desk designing. Happiest when they are pontificating, they often leave unfinished masterpieces in their wake. The void they leave in their organisation is willingly filled by other, over confident mortals.

Unfortunately, because wordsmiths tend to be good communicators, their companies often put up with them because they can be wheeled out as the company representative at the next designer's conference. Every company needs one..., right?

The rear-view mirror

You know the sort... They are the marketing representative that will lend support only to the guaranteed blockbuster, shunning everything else, regardless of quality or merit. And we all know what tends to happen to projects that lose marketing support; they get axed or are simply left to wither on the vine. Now call me old fashioned, but I thought it was the job of a marketer to actually promote and market all products, not just those bankers like the next FIFA or the next Tomb Raider which really don't need marketing?

Compromised design

All of the characters described above exist in their hundreds, and they are unwitting co-conspirators in the production of compromised designs. In fact, as an exercise for anyone employed in game development, it would be interesting if you were to look around your organisation and put names to the descriptions above. I'm sure the results would be eye opening, even amusing.

The balanced view

This rather tongue-in-cheek overview of some of the less savoury characters in the industry should not disguise the fact that the industry is also home to some of the most imaginative, switched on people to be found anywhere on the planet. The fact is that by changing a few things we can all make this industry more successful. By rediscovering the art of design, and by finding the right balance between creativity and professionalism, we will all end up enjoying ourselves more and making more money. It is not rocket science. If a game takes four years to make, it's the wrong game.

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Design games

Game design is at the heart of the computer games industry and aside from a few notable exceptions (hello Sid, Peter, Shigsy), the discipline has not been given the respect or the priority it deserves.

It is time to elevate the process of design within the industry to a new and broader level of quality and success. To spend more money on getting the design process right, to waste less money in development and to make more profit by selling more units to a hungrier global public.

This is where I come clean and spend a few moments talking about myself and my new venture; **designgames**. I have been in the industry since 1981 when I started my career as a programmer with Thorn EMI's new games division, Creative Sparks. I went on to work for Microprose both in the US and the UK, for Electronic Arts as a Producer and I was in a team of three that set up Hasbro Interactive, where I operated as Development Director. I then set up a development outfit called Deep Red in Milton Keynes with my then business partner. In January of this year I left Deep Red to focus on my new venture and to get back to what I enjoy most, designing great games.

Before starting in this industry I designed a board game called Vectorace which I had published to much critical acclaim. Sadly it didn't make me my first million; that was to come later.

Back to computer games; I have designed, programmed or managed a lengthy list of successful titles, including Monopoly Tycoon, Risk II, Frogger, Risk, EA Football Manager, FIFA (the original Sega Megadrive version), Gunship and Knights of the Sky. I've also worked with Peter Molyneux and Bullfrog on Syndicate, Theme Park and Dungeon Keeper.

Back to the future

With all of this publisher and developer experience behind me I suddenly saw where I could make a real impact on the industry; by taking intellectual property or concepts and by applying my skills and knowledge as a game designer, turning them into a top selling game and a successful gaming franchise. Having worked with some of the industry's most valuable IP I have developed a natural instinct for finding ways to maximise its worth without damaging its image. I have also developed a priceless skill in being able to take the bare bones of a concept and turning it in to a fully developed game design. My programmer background also means that I am not going to design something that is difficult to realise or that is structured in a code-unfriendly way.

Removing the responsibility of design from the creative dev team themselves is the way forward in my opinion. This notion will undoubtedly be met with fierce opposition from those creatives that are currently operating in such in-house roles, but believe me, having been there myself, this will free them up to focus on making great game designs come to life. Teams will once again be able to truly focus on their primary skills and the things that they most enjoy. It allows us the opportunity to work together to create a gaming masterpiece.

My new company consists of three people at the moment and I don't envisage it growing much beyond that. The other two people have similar backgrounds to my own and have the same design beliefs and ethics as me. They are also driven like me; driven to create awesome products, but critically, without the Prima Donna nature that so often accompanies people involved with the design side of the industry.

Of course, if it takes off the way I expect it to, I might well expand to encompass closer links to a more formal design school, where new recruits will be soaked in every important aspect of great game design and not just the concept itself or the minutiae of the subject matter. I am already talking to a UK-based University regarding the setting up and sponsoring of a complimentary game design course.

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Builders don't often make good architects

Builders don't often make good architects and programmers don't often make good game designers. That's probably unintentionally ruffled a few feathers; perhaps it will help if I have another attempt at explaining the background to that statement. If game designers suddenly started helping out on the coding of a project there would quite rightly be an outcry. Hold that thought for a moment and then reconsider why it should be accepted without question for programmers to include game design in their list of responsibilities?

This ongoing removal of design from the sharp end of the development cycle will afford companies a much better chance of hitting their development targets, both in a scheduling sense and in a product quality sense.

I also believe that the people in teams around the world that are initially worried by this change will grow to see that rather than threatening their role it actually enhances it. The too-many-cooks-in-the-design-room problem has come about through demand outstripping supply. People have naturally found the need to fill the void and have ended up involved in an area of game creation where they have little or no experience. With good design supporting their development efforts they will stand a much greater chance of being involved with the next blockbuster.

In most other creative industries, my company would not be on its own, it would be one of many similar design agencies. I firmly believe that once it can be seen that this new way does indeed improve the prospects for all involved, there will be more outfits setting up similar ventures.

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- Full game design
- Game design consultancy
- Game design appraisal
- Preparing a design for presentation
- Independent game review
- Competitive study
- Global suitability review
- Game progression and difficulty evaluation
- Cross-platform redesign
- Instruction manual creation
- Reverse-engineered design bible
- Interface prototyping & styling
- Character creation & story development
- Style guide & game logo creation

If you are interested in what **designgames** can do for you, please visit the company website; designgames.co.uk or send an email to Kevin Buckner at kevinb@designgames.co.uk

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